

Did You Kill My Loved One to Punish Me?

1 Kings 17:17-24 (NIV)

¹⁷ Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" ¹⁹ "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" ²² The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" ²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

Our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings goes back to about the mid 9th century B.C. The nation of Israel has split in two. The 10 northern tribes have broken away taking the name "Israel" while leaving the tribes of Judah and Benjamin by themselves taking the name "Judah." A man named Ahab was the current king over Israel, and he was a wicked king. So wicked, in fact, that God sent the prophet Elijah to Ahab to announce a drought upon the land that would last for years and would not cease until God said so. But Elijah lived in Israel as well. This drought was going to affect him. So, God provided for Elijah.

First, God sent Elijah to a specific place to drink from the brook there. On top of the steady source of water, God also used ravens to bring Elijah bread and meat every morning and every evening. Eventually, though, the brook ran dry. When it did, God sent Elijah to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon, northwest of Israel, outside of Israel. This widow was not an Israelite. However, God told Elijah to ask her for water and a piece of bread. The widow replied that she was on her way to make one last meal for her son and herself because that's all the flour and oil that she had left. Elijah answered her concern by sharing God's promise that "the jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land." (1 Kings 17:14) It happened just as God said. The widow kept using the same handful of flour in a jar and the same little bit of olive oil in a jug, and it kept making meals for the three of them without running out through the entire drought.

Some time later, before the drought ended, tragedy struck. "The son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing." (verse 17) The one and only son of this widow died, even while God had taken such great care, providing a miracle each and every day by providing the flour and the oil, but still he allowed the son to die. I mean, the kid survived a drought but then gets killed by a cold? It doesn't make sense.

In her grief, the widow brought accusations against God, against Elijah: "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" (verse 18) Everything was going fine. In fact, this man of God came into her life and they were taken special care of. But did that special care make God finally recognize the woman for who she was, that he finally saw all the things that she had done wrong, the people she had snubbed, all the ones she refused to help, all the awful things she had said, all the immoral thoughts she had had?

Admittedly, we ask the same questions as the widow: "Why did this happen to me?" "What did I do wrong?" "Am I cursed?" "Did I commit some kind of sin that God won't let go of and this is how he is getting back at me?" "Wasn't life better when I wasn't paying attention to God and just kind of did my own thing?" We ask these questions because we think that knowing the reason why these things happen to us will bring us comfort.

But would the answer really soothe us? Because there is an answer. Why does God allow your loved one to die? It's because of sin, their sin, any amount of disobedience that this person has committed against God and his Word. "The wages of sin is death," God says. People die because they are not perfect, because they are sinful. That "what do you have against me?" question hits close to home. We know that we have done wrong. We know that we deserve punishment, but we stop short of saying we have been so bad as to warrant death, or the death of a loved one. Yet, the truth is we die, our loved ones die because of their own personal sin.

Elijah does not answer the widow's questions, and he did not tell her to stop asking such questions as if the mere utterance of them was utter unbelief. Instead, he takes the widow's tragedy to heart and takes personal responsibility to ask God this widow's questions. He asks for the son and takes the body to the room where he was staying. Elijah cried out to the LORD in prayer, "LORD my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" (verse 20)

This question did not come from unbelief. The faithful prophet of the LORD asked it himself. This question is legitimate because, quite frankly, the situation didn't make sense. Why did the God who promised life bring death instead? Why did the God who so miraculously provided for their preservation of their lives suddenly stop providing life? What could have caused this? God is in control of all things. Why would he allow this? Why would he do this to this woman?

Asking God why he allowed tragedy into your life is not a sin. You should never feel as if you can't ask this question, whether it be to God, to your pastor, or to your Christian family and friends. The asking is not sinful, but what good is asking if your questions are never answered?

The widow thought that the answer to "Why would the God of life bring death instead?" was due to her own sinfulness. She thought that God was punishing her because of her failures and that he was doing this to her by hurting those that she loved most. She realized that the wages of sin is death, and she thought that her sins brought about the death of her son.

But God did not give her this answer. He did not say that her boy would die because of her sins. In fact, he gives a completely different answer as Elijah "stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the LORD, 'LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!' The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, 'Look, your son is alive!'" (verses 21-23) This is the very first resurrection account in the Old Testament. Presumably no one had even seen this done before. Elijah hadn't been given special instructions like he had about the brook or the flour and the oil. Elijah believed that God was the bringer of life and he asked God to do right now. God proved to him and to the widow that he not only promises life but he brings it.

By bringing the widow's son back to life, God proved that he does not bring the death of loved ones into our lives to punish us for our sins. Yes, the wages of sin is death. Death is a consequence of our sins. That's the reason death exists in our world and why loved ones die. However, God is the one who promises to bring life and he is the only one who makes good on that promise. No one else restores dead people back to life.

God does not use the death of loved ones to punish us on this side to heaven because God made good on his promise to bring life. He came down from heaven and lived for us so that he could die for us. He took on human flesh so that he could put all of the punishment that our sins deserved on himself instead. This is why Jesus died on the cross. The punishment of our sin was satisfied by Jesus' death; it's paid for. This is how we know that God does not punish us by killing our loved ones.

God does not punish you by bringing death into your life. No, he uses death to draw you closer to him. It seems backwards, but God's foolishness is wiser than man's wisdom. When you feel the weight of your sins, when you are calling out to God asking him if this death of a loved one is punishment for your sins, God leads you back to his promises, his actions. He brings life, not death. A few times in the Bible he granted it immediately and raised someone from the dead like with the widow's son or the boy at Nain, but what happens far more often is how he raises us from spiritual death to believe that he has satisfied the punishment of our sins by unleashing it upon Jesus. Jesus was punished for our sins by his death so that we would live even after we suffer the consequence of death. God has promised us life eternal with him in heaven, and this comes from the God who can and did raise dead people back to life. God records this account of the widow's son so that you know that he is good to bring you life in the face of death.

So, what do you say when someone, a Christian even, experiences the death of a loved one? Instead of trying to find the reason, follow Elijah's example. Take this death and ask the God of life to do something about it. Ask the person who is mourning if you can pray with them asking God the same questions that they are asking. In your own time, ask God these questions and pray for life for the one who is mourning. Tell the person mourning that you know for a fact that God is not punishing them with this death because he already satisfied that punishment when Jesus hung on the cross. He will not punish us further by taking loved ones out of our lives. Instead, he leads you to call upon his name, ask your tough questions to him, and listen to his promises of life eternal, of life after death, eternal life in heaven with the God who died for us to bring us that life.

God brought life from death. No one else has ever done that except God. This is the God we have, the God who is with us even when we experience the death of a loved one. This is the God who we look to and pray to, the God that we can ask the hard questions of. He brings us life, just as he promised. As God brings us spiritual life, eternal life, through his Word, we confess as the widow did, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth." (verse 24) Amen.